The missing pieces

—"Even if we get lost in our feelings and end up hurting each other, I still want your touch."

Friday.

Friday meant the week was ending. Friday meant the weekend was beginning. Friday meant, for most people, release—the loosening of the belt, the setting down of the tools, the permission to stop performing productivity and start performing leisure. The collective exhale. The permission slip signed by the calendar itself.

For Est, Friday meant tomorrow.

Tomorrow was Saturday. Saturday was Lego's party. Saturday was the invitation that Hong had extended and that Est had accepted with two words—I'll come—words that had felt, at the time, like a small thing, a casual commitment, a social gesture no different from the thousand social gestures he had made in his professional life. But the words had not been small. The words had been enormous. The words had been a door opening, and the door opened onto a room that contained the possibility of—

The boy.

Tomorrow was also Valentine's Day. The coincidence was cruel—the kind of cruelty that the universe dispensed not with malice but with indifference, the way weather was cruel, the way timing was cruel, the way the calendar arranged its holidays without consulting the people who would have to survive them.

Bangkok was performing it already. The city outside his window was loud and saturated. Red and pink—the colors of the holiday draped across every surface, every storefront, every lamppost, the city's commercial infrastructure executing its annual transformation with the precision and the enthusiasm of a machine that had been programmed to manufacture romance and that was operating at maximum capacity.

Heart-shaped balloons clustered at the entrances of shopping malls like congregations of inflated organs, the helium keeping them buoyant, the strings keeping them tethered, the metaphor keeping itself. Rose vendors lined the sidewalks, their buckets overflowing with blooms that were being purchased by the armload, the flowers traveling from vendor to lover to Instagram post with the assembly-line efficiency of a city that had industrialized romance.

Teddy bears stared from shop windows with the blank, stitched-on expressions of creatures that had been manufactured to represent affection and that represented, instead, the specific, hollow, commercially optimized version of love that the holiday required. The bears were soft. The bears were stuffed. The bears were the physical

manifestation of a sentiment that had been designed by a marketing team and produced in a factory and distributed through a supply chain and priced according to market demand.

The decorations were everywhere. The decorations were inescapable. The decorations were the visual equivalent of a song stuck on repeat—the same melody, the same key, the same three notes played over and over until the music lost its meaning and became noise.

His phone was on the kitchen counter. Face down. The position it had been in since morning—the deliberate, conscious, self-protective position of a person who understood that the screen was a weapon and that the weapon was currently pointed at him.

He had not looked. He had not opened Instagram. Had not searched his name. Had not tapped the notification badge, which he knew, without looking, would be showing a number that was larger than yesterday's number and smaller than tomorrow's.

The Valentine's Day perfume campaign had dropped that morning. The campaign was—everywhere. The campaign was for a perfume. The perfume was—irrelevant. The fragrance itself was a secondary concern, a liquid pretext for the real product being sold, which was not scent but image, not aroma but aspiration, not the contents of the bottle but the contents of the photograph.

They were looking at the models.

The centerpiece photograph showed two men. On the left: Est—On the right: Hong—the gray hair styled deliberately, the eyeliner sharp, the rebel domesticated just enough to be commercially viable but not so much that the rebellion disappeared.

The photograph was a study in opposites. The internet recognized it immediately—the same pattern it had recognized in the viral rooftop photo, the same binary that the algorithm loved: this vs. that, Prince vs. Rebel, polished vs. raw, ice vs. fire. But this photograph was different from the rooftop candid. This photograph was—professional. Intentional. The contrast was not accidental but composed, not stolen but offered, the creative team having taken the viral moment and reverse-engineered it into a campaign, the chaos converted into commerce, the controversy packaged and sold back to the audience that had created it.

And the audience was—divided. The response was polarized—the engagement metrics spiking, the comments multiplying, the algorithm feeding on the division the way fire fed on oxygen.

The campaign was a success.

Est was miserable.

He picked up the phone. The screen lit. The notification badge showed a number he did not count—a number that was not a number but a verdict, a measurement of the distance between who he was and who the internet believed he was. He opened the app. The comments arrived—the infinite scroll, the bottomless feed, the digital well that had no floor.

He scrolled.

"How could he just leave Kai like that after everything? I guess the 'Prince' really is made of ice."

The comment was three hours old. Twelve hundred likes. Twelve hundred people who had read the sentence and had agreed and had pressed the button and had moved on, the agreement requiring no evidence, no investigation, no consideration of the possibility that the sentence was wrong.

"Est always looked like he cared more about the camera than his own boyfriend. Look at his face—zero emotion even in the breakup announcement."

"Maybe Kai finally found someone who isn't a robot."

"He didn't even defend himself. Silence is an admission of guilt, right?"

"He's technically perfect, but there's nothing behind the eyes. It's like looking at a mannequin."

"Does Est ever actually sleep? Or does he just plug into a wall to recharge?"

"I heard he's a nightmare on set. Doesn't talk to anyone, just stays in his headphones. So arrogant."

The headphones. The noise-canceling headphones that he wore without music—the ones that sat on their marble pedestal by the door, the ones that blocked the world's frequency, the ones that were not arrogance but armor, not coldness but survival, the specific, desperate, last-resort defense of a person who absorbed everyone else's emotions and who needed the silence the way other people needed air.

The internet did not know this. The internet did not have a button for context. The internet did not have a button for mercy. The internet had buttons for like and dislike and comment and share, and the buttons were pressed, and the opinions were distributed, and the person inside the opinions grew smaller with each press.

He should have stopped scrolling. He didn't stop. The comments shifted. The algorithm, detecting engagement, served him more—the infinite scroll, the bottomless feed, the digital well that had no floor and that he was falling down, the

falling slow and deliberate and utterly, completely voluntary.

"Why did he come back? Did he fail in NYC? Usually, you only come back to Thailand when the international gigs dry up."

"The agency is pairing him with Hong. It's such a cliché marketing stunt—The Prince and the Black Sheep."

Kai's presence was everywhere. Kai's social media was feeding it—the careful, strategic, precisely calibrated social media of a person who understood that silence could be louder than speech and that the most effective accusation was the one that was never made.

Est knew this. He knew without looking. Kai was doing what Kai had always done: managing the narrative. Performing the wounded party. The avoidance was a weapon. The avoidance was a fire that Kai tended every time he went live, adding fuel with each unacknowledged mention, each redirected question, each almost-imperceptible tightening of the mouth that the audience read as pain and that was, Est knew, performance.

Kai had always been performing.

The threads about Hong were different. The division was sharper—the opinion split along lines that were not aesthetic but moral, the internet conducting its trial with the efficiency and the fairness of a system that had no judge, no jury, no rules of evidence, and no appeals process.

There were the people who blamed Hong.

"Look at the way Hong looks at Est. He's trying to corrupt the Prince!"

"I bet Hong is just using Est's 'International' fame to boost his music career. He's a social climber in leather boots."

Social climber. The accusation that the internet leveled at anyone who was seen in proximity to a more famous person—the accusation that reduced all human connection to transaction, all friendship to strategy, all warmth to calculation.

And there were the people defending Hong. The defenders were—fierce. Specific. The defenders spoke with the authority of people who had followed Hong's career before the viral photo, before the campaign, before the Prince-and-Rebel narrative had consumed his identity.

"People saying he's using Est for fame are blind. Hong has been 'Underground' since day one. If anything, he's giving Est a soul. Leave the 'Black Sheep' alone."

"I don't care about his modeling. His guitar speaks a language his sarcasm can't translate."

"Stop talking about his eyeliner and start talking about that guitar riff he posted last night. You can't fake that kind of emotion. He's a musician first, a model second."

The guitar riff. Est had not heard the guitar riff—had not known, until this moment, that Hong posted music, that Hong's social media contained not just the leather-and-chains aesthetic but the actual, tangible, listen-to-this evidence of a person who was an artist, a person whose instrument spoke a language that his sarcasm couldn't translate.

He searched. He found it. He pressed play.

The sound that came through his phone's speaker was—not what he expected. Not the grunge. Not the chaos. Not the aggressive, confrontational, loud-to-drown-out-the-silence music that Hong's aesthetic suggested. The guitar riff was soft. Melodic. The notes were clean—each one placed precisely, each one sustained for exactly the right duration, the phrasing patient, the melody moving with the unhurried, searching quality of a person who was not playing at the listener but playing for themselves.

The hidden peony. The soft thing in the room of torn posters and silver studs.

Est listened to the riff three times. Then he put the phone down and picked it up again and read the comment that had led him there:

"Hong's identity is getting lost under this new company. He was about craft, about music. Now he's just a ship for a 'Prince' who doesn't even have a pulse."

The sentence stung—not because of the attack on Est (he was numb to that by now, the mannequin comments having exhausted his capacity for personal offense) but because of the truth it contained about Hong. Hong's identity was being consumed. The Prince-and-Rebel narrative was replacing the person. The same machine that had converted Est into a product was now converting Hong into a supporting character, the same dehumanization applied to a different body, the same erasure performed on a different face.

Est had done this. Not deliberately—not with intent or malice or the conscious decision to subsume Hong's identity into his own. But by proximity. By existing in the frame. By being the Prince whose brand was so large that everyone who stood beside it became a footnote.

And then—Lego.

Lego's name appeared in the threads like a bright, unexpected note in a minor key

—a flash of color in a monochrome conversation, the specific, irrepressible quality of Lego's presence asserting itself even in a medium that was designed for conflict. Lego, who was not part of the campaign, who was not employed by the agency, who existed outside the professional infrastructure that had created the Prince-and-Rebel binary—Lego was being pulled into the conversation by the gravitational force of his own visibility.

"Can we talk about how Lego is the only person who follows both of them? He's the gatekeeper."

"Lego, blink twice if Hong is holding Est hostage in your studio. We need a live stream right now!"

The comments about Lego were—lighter. The internet treated Lego differently—with the specific, almost protective affection that audiences reserved for people whose online presence was warm and genuine and who produced content that was not controversial but creative, not divisive but connective. Lego's feeds were full of videos—collaborations with makeup artists, behind-the-scenes glimpses of his aerial work, tutorials for nail art and makeup, him dancing and climbing aerial silks, the content clean and viral, many of the videos surpassing a million views. The audience saw the brightness. The audience loved the brightness. The audience protected the brightness because the brightness was rare and the internet was dark and the combination created a loyalty that was fierce and genuine and sometimes excessive.

But even Lego's reputation was being touched by the controversy. The association—with Hong, with Est, with the viral narrative—was leaving marks on a surface that had previously been unmarked.

"Leave Lego out of this. He's an angel and he doesn't deserve to be dragged into your shipping wars."

"I'm sorry but why is Lego friends with both of them? Something doesn't add up. Either he's playing both sides or he knows something we don't."

Est stared at the comment. The suggestion that Lego—Lego, who had greeted him at the warehouse with a brightness that was so pure it had almost hurt, who had offered him ice and had beamed when he'd accepted it—the suggestion that Lego was playing both sides was so far from the truth that it felt like a different language. A language spoken by people who had never met Lego, who had never felt the weight of his lean against their shoulder, who had never been told to eat ice by someone who was absolutely, ludicrously, dead serious about ice.

They didn't know anything. But they were certain. The internet was always certain—the certainty the fuel, the certainty the fire, the certainty the thing that kept the machine running and the comments flowing and the lives of the people inside the

comments getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

"Hong has never had rumors like these."

"Hong has always had influencer and model friends and this never happened."

"Est's fans are crazy fans who are taking everything to the extreme."

"Leave him alone. He moved across the world to start over; give the man some space to breathe."

And then—at the bottom of a thread he should not have been reading, in a comment with thirty-seven likes, posted by a username he did not recognize—

"Est's eyes in the latest campaign don't look cold… they look exhausted. I hope he's actually okay."

I hope he's actually okay.

Eight words. Thirty-seven likes. A nothing number. A rounding error in the thousands and thousands of comments that the campaign had generated. But the eight words reached through the screen and found the place where Est kept the things that mattered—the crystal jar, the overlooked objects, the small, physical, real things that proved that the world was not entirely made of surfaces.

He was not actually okay.

He put the phone down.

The sigh was long. The ceiling was white. He was getting everyone into trouble—Hong, whose identity was being consumed; Lego, whose brightness was being questioned; the group, whose private, real, fire-lit, metal-chair-sitting, omelet-eating, ice-crunching world was being dragged into the public sphere by the gravitational force of Est's fame.

He was the one who was corrupting the boys.

The thought was familiar. The thought had the specific, well-worn quality of a thought that had been thought many times—the same thought he'd had at the company party, the same thought that had lived in the Maryland house with the precisely-timed birthday texts. The thought that said: you are the problem. Your presence causes damage. The people around you would be better off without the weight of your proximity.

He stared at the ceiling. The ceiling offered nothing. The ceiling never did.

He picked up the phone again.

Not to scroll. This time, not to scroll. He opened his messages. The conversation with Hong—the thread that had been growing over the past week, the exchange that was becoming, message by message, something that Est did not have a word for yet. Not friendship—friendship was too organized, too definitive. Something messier. Something that was being built in real time, brick by brick, text by text, the construction unplanned, the blueprint nonexistent, the structure emerging not from design but from use.

Hong: The creative team wants us in matching black for the next shoot. I told them I'd rather eat my own guitar.

Est: What did they say?

Hong: They said "we'll revisit the concept." Which is corporate for "we're going to make you wear matching black."

Est: We could compromise. Black, but different textures.

Hong: …that's actually not terrible. Since when do you have opinions about fashion?

Est: I've always had opinions. I just wasn't allowed to have them.

The sentence sat in the thread. Est had typed it quickly—the words arriving before the filter could catch them, the honesty slipping through the cracks of the marble the way it had been slipping through all week, each text with Hong loosening another stone, widening another gap, the architecture of his professional exterior developing structural issues that he was not entirely sure he wanted to fix.

Est scrolled to the end of the thread. The last message was from Hong, sent that morning:

Hong: Tomorrow. 11pm. Dress code is "whatever makes you feel like a person."

The sentence was not a joke. The sentence was a gift—the specific, Hong-shaped gift that arrived wrapped in sarcasm and was, underneath the wrapping, something genuine. Something that understood. Something that said: I know what the industry has done to you. I know what the cameras have done to you. I know what the turtleneck is for. And I am telling you, explicitly, to take it off.

The internet said he was empty. The internet was wrong. The internet was wrong because the internet had never sat beside him at a fire pit. The internet had never offered him a cigarette. The internet had never said you seem like you need it with the flat, unimpressed, deeply compassionate honesty that was Hong's primary language.

Tomorrow he would go as himself. Not the Prince. Not the Darling. Not the

mannequin or the robot or the empty thing that the internet had constructed from screenshots and shipping wars and the accumulated, context-stripped, commercially optimized fragments of a person who was, in reality, full. Full of scent and memory and the specific, aching, collector's hunger for beauty that drove him to organize perfumes by mood and to keep a crystal jar of overlooked things on his bedside table.

Himself.

The cigarette burned down. He crushed it on the railing—the familiar gesture, the cherry dying, the small orange thing extinguished. The city hummed. The Valentine's decorations glowed. The internet continued its conversation about a person who did not exist, debating the emptiness of a man who was, in the dark of his apartment, holding a glass jar full of beautiful things and choosing, against every instinct and every scar and every comment that said he was nothing, to believe that he was something.

That he was worth finding.

That the boy would be there.

That tomorrow would be different.

Saturday arrived the way all dreaded things arrived: inevitably.

He did not check Instagram. He did not search his own name. He did not look at the trending topics or Kai's latest post or any of the thousand small cruelties that the internet was surely producing while he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and tried to convince himself that today was just a day, that the party was just a party, that the potential of finding the boy was just a potential and not a certainty and definitely not something worth the specific, anxious, almost-painful anticipation that was currently occupying his chest like a second heartbeat.

He got up.

He made coffee. He drank it while standing at the window, watching Bangkok wake up to its commercial celebration of love. The city was already dressed—the red and pink intensifying, the balloons multiplying, the rose vendors doubling their inventory, the teddy bears staring their blank stares, the whole urban machinery of romance operating at peak capacity for its biggest day.

The coffee was black. The coffee was honest. The coffee tasted like itself—like coffee, like bitterness, like the specific, unadorned, un-sweetened reality of a beverage that did not pretend to be anything other than what it was.

His phone buzzed.

Hong's name on the screen. No text—just an image.

Est opened it.

The poster was a visual assault.

The image was a high-resolution photograph of a poster—a poster that looked like it had been designed in a fever dream of irony and lace, the aesthetic simultaneously earnest and absurd, the visual equivalent of a joke told with a completely straight face. Pink and cream, saturated to the point of parody, the colors colliding like two aesthetic philosophies that had gotten into a fight and decided to resolve it through font choice. Large, ornate pink letters across the top proclaimed: ROMANCE IS IN THE AIR.

Below the headline, the details were laid out in a font that looked like it belonged on a vintage wedding invitation: date, address, digital entry code, a list of names—DJs, performers, artists Est had never heard of. But it was the illustration at the bottom that caught his attention.

Instead of a traditional Valentine's icon—the bow-wielding Cupid, the heart-pierced lovers—there was a drawing of a cherub who had, somehow, clumsily and fatally, shot himself with his own bow. The angel looked surprised. His little marble face was twisted in an expression of distorted confusion, the arrow protruding from his own chest, the bow dangling uselessly from his hand. Golden blood—or light, or ichor, or whatever it was that ran through the veins of a self-sabotaging celestial being—pooled beneath him in an ornate puddle.

Hong: this is what we're dealing with tonight

Est looked at the cherub. The cherub looked back with its wounded, confused, accidentally-suicidal expression. The expression of a creature that had tried to perform its one job—the creation of love—and had instead created a mess.

Est: The cherub looks like he's having a worse day than me.

Est: It's very...pink.

Hong: The cherub is all of us. Victims of our own terrible aim.

Hong: wait until you see the venue. pink is the least of your problems.

Est: I'll be there.

Hong: I know you will. I saved you a seat and a dirty martini.

Est: You remembered.

Hong: I remember everything useful. Your drink order is useful. Your taste in turtlenecks is not.

Est: I'm not wearing a turtleneck tonight.

Hong: Then I'll have to find another reason to make fun of you. Challenge accepted.

Est put down the phone. He looked at the poster again. The cherub stared back at him with the expression of someone who had tried to create love and had instead created chaos. He understood the feeling.

The morning passed in preparation. Not physical preparation—not yet. Mental preparation. The specific, internal, exhausting work of convincing himself that leaving the apartment was a good idea, that being around people was a good idea, that the risk of exposure and noise and the overwhelming, sensory-saturating experience of a Valentine's party was worth the potential reward.

The potential reward was the boy.

The boy whose face wouldn't resolve. The boy whose hands had traced the edge of something unfinished. The boy who might—might—be at the party tonight, somewhere in the crowd, carrying the same fragmented memory that Est was carrying. The same taste of alcohol and olives. The same question—who?—that had been living in Est's apartment for a week, occupying the space between the perfume shelf and the crystal jar, growing not smaller with time but larger, the question expanding to fill the silence that Est's life was built on.

The boy was worth the risk.

Est told himself this. He told himself this while eating lunch—protein, the strict diet, the body maintained like a machine because the machine was the product and the product had to perform. He told himself this while showering. The shower was long. Deliberate. The water hot enough to steam the glass, hot enough to make his skin pink, hot enough to feel like a ritual washing rather than a routine cleaning—the cleansing not of dirt but of the week, of the comments, of the internet's accumulated cruelty, the hot water carrying it all down the drain.

He paid attention to his skin—the skincare routine that had become, over the years, as automatic as breathing, the products applied in sequence, the surfaces maintained with the same precision he brought to everything. He emerged from the bathroom clean and deliberate and as ready as he was going to be.

The clothes were chosen with care. Not the turtleneck. Tonight was not a turtleneck night. Tonight required something different—something that was not armor but expression, not defense but declaration, not the wall but the door.

He chose a long-sleeved black shirt with a slightly high collar—not a turtleneck, not the full coverage, but a nod to it, an acknowledgment that the person wearing it

had once needed the protection and was now, tonight, choosing to need it slightly less. Black pants—simple, well-fitted, the kind that disappeared into the background and let the upper body do the talking. And over it, a reddish-brown jacket—warm enough for the cold evening wind, structured enough to look intentional, the color different enough from his usual black and charcoal to feel like a statement. The statement was small. The statement was: I am trying something.

Jewelry. He didn't usually wear jewelry—the campaigns required specific accessories, the brands provided their own, the personal preference had been subsumed by the professional requirement. But tonight he chose: rings, silver, two on the left hand and one on the right. The rings were his—purchased years ago, worn in private, the small, personal, non-commercial objects that belonged to the person rather than the product. A matching silver necklace—simple, a thin chain with a small pendant that rested against his chest beneath the shirt. A watch—the one he actually liked, not the one he was contractually obligated to wear for campaigns, but the one he'd chosen himself, the one that told the time without telling anyone anything about his brand value. And an ear cuff—something he used to wear occasionally, before the industry had opinions about his ears, before the ears became assets, before the accessories became contracts.

He looked at himself in the mirror. The face looked back—familiar and unfamiliar, the same face from the campaigns but different somehow, the jewelry and the jacket and the absence of the turtleneck creating a version of himself that was not quite the product but not quite the person either. Something in between. Something transitional. Something that was moving from one thing toward another and hadn't arrived yet but was on its way.

Good enough, he thought. Good enough for tonight.

The jacket pockets were large—large enough to hold his noise-canceling headphones, his phone, his wallet. The essentials of survival in a crowded space. The tools that would allow him to retreat if the noise became too much, if the empathy-sponge became saturated, if the world's frequency overwhelmed his capacity to process it.

He put the headphones in his pocket.

He put the phone in his pocket.

He paused at the door. The marble pedestal where the headphones usually sat was empty—the headphones were with him, in his pocket, available but not deployed. The pedestal's emptiness was new. The emptiness said: the thing that protects you is still here, but you're carrying it instead of wearing it. You're choosing exposure. You're choosing the noise.

He opened the door.

At 10:40, he ordered a Grab.

The ride was quiet. Est sat in the back seat and watched Bangkok pass by the window—the city in its Valentine's costume, the red and pink intensifying as the evening deepened, the decorations glowing against the darkening sky. Every mall, every storefront, every street corner had been colonized. Couples walked hand in hand through the illuminated streets, their bodies angled toward each other, their faces lit by phone screens and neon signs and the specific, warm, golden light that the city produced at night. Heart-shaped balloons escaped from storefronts and floated upward into the smog, the red shapes rising and shrinking and disappearing into the brown haze above the skyline.

The city was performing love at maximum volume.

Est watched the performance and thought about the boy.

What if he wasn't there?

The thought arrived uninvited, settling into his chest with the weight of a stone dropped into still water. What if the boy had been a visitor, a tourist, someone passing through the warehouse scene who would never return? What if the boy had no connection to Hong or Lego or any of the people Est was about to see? What if the fragmented memory of that night was the only thing Est would ever have—the hands, the asking, the unfinished tattoo—and the face would remain forever unresolved, forever blurred, the question answered only by silence?

The thought was—unbearable.

He pushed it away. He focused on the window. He focused on the city passing by—the billboards and the traffic and the couples and the balloons, the visual noise of a Saturday night in Bangkok, the sensory overload that would have, a week ago, sent him reaching for the headphones. He didn't reach. He let the noise in. He let the city pass through him the way the bass at the warehouse had passed through him—through the metal chair, through his body, into the center of his chest.

He focused on the fact that he was going to a party. That he was leaving his apartment. That he was doing the thing that Hong had told him to do: showing up. Showing up was enough. Showing up was the goal. Whatever happened after that was—whatever happened.

The venue was not the warehouse. The warehouse had been industrial, raw, the specific aesthetic of a space that had been claimed rather than designed—the art of appropriation, the beauty of function repurposed as form.

This place was—not industrial. From the outside, it looked like something between a church and an old house that had been remodeled, the architecture European in influence, the windows large and arched, the ceiling high and visible through the glass. The building had the specific, slightly faded, slightly romantic quality of a structure that had been beautiful once and was beautiful again, the beauty not restored but reinterpreted, the old bones wearing new clothes.

Groups of people clustered outside. The crowd was different from the company party crowd—different in posture, in energy, in the specific, visible, tangible quality of being present by choice rather than by obligation. These people were here because they wanted to be here. The wanting was visible in the way they stood—loose, relaxed, the bodies of people who were not performing but existing.

Motorcycles parked in rows. A stand selling merchandise—t-shirts, pins, the commercial infrastructure of an event that had achieved a certain level of cultural relevance. Some people were queuing. Some were waiting. Some were talking in groups—the conversations animated, the laughter genuine, the social interactions conducted in the specific, unforced register of people who knew each other and who enjoyed the knowing. Some were just smoking, the ember-points of cigarettes glowing in the evening air like small, patient fires.

Est got out of the Grab.

The cold evening wind hit his face—the wind he had dressed for, the wind that justified the jacket and the layers and the decision to be warm rather than fashionable. The wind was real. The wind was honest. The wind did not have an opinion about his turtleneck or his jawline or his ex-boyfriend or his engagement metrics.

He stood on the sidewalk. The venue was in front of him. The people were around him. The music was inside—he could hear it, the bass traveling through the building's old bones and emerging through the windows and the walls, the sound reaching him the way the tide reached the sand, inevitably, persistently, without asking permission.

He was already here. There was no turning back. He would push away the thoughts that told him he was out of place and enjoy the night. He would push away the comments and the comparisons and the internet's verdict and the weight of being the person who corrupted everyone he stood next to. He would push away the turtleneck—not physically, because he wasn't wearing it, but metaphorically, the collar that had been around his neck for years, the armor that had been his career and his identity and his prison.

He would show up.

He would show up as the person who wore silver rings and a reddish-brown jacket

and who smoked cigarettes on balconies and who organized perfumes by mood and who kept a crystal jar of overlooked things by his bed. The person who had always had opinions about fashion but who hadn't been allowed to have them. The person who had told Hong I've always had opinions and who had meant it, and who was now, standing on a sidewalk outside a Valentine's party in Bangkok with the cold wind on his face, about to put those opinions on display.

He took a breath. The air was cold. The air tasted like the city—like exhaust and street food and the distant, almost imperceptible sweetness of the roses being sold on every corner, the scent carried on the wind, arriving without explanation, the way the best things arrived.

He walked toward the door.

The headphones stayed in his pocket.